

## Post #3: Facilitating a participative meeting

Watch Anthony's video [here!](#)



### Why lead a meeting in a participative way?

What is a non-participative meeting? It would be a "top-down" meeting, a briefing, an information session, in other words a moment during which the participants in the meeting would be passive.

Either you have the power to force them to experience these kinds of moments - for example, because there is a subordinate relationship between you and them - or you don't. If you don't, it's useful to ask yourself whether the participants find themselves passive, and whether they'll want to come back to future meetings. If you don't, it's worth asking yourself whether the participants find themselves being passive, and whether they'll want to come back to your next meetings. It is then likely that you are looking to make your meetings more participative.

Every meeting has its implicit codes, and going to a meeting without knowing them creates apprehension. The classic meeting codes - arriving on time, following an agenda, introducing yourself, asking for the floor, waiting for the floor, arguing what you're saying, being clear and concise, adopting a to-the-point position, etc. - can create apprehension, even fear, in many people.

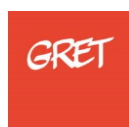
By devising other ways of leading meetings, you as facilitators can make your invitations to a meeting reassuring and motivating. People are more likely to come to a meeting if they feel welcome, i.e. not ignored, judged or rejected.

### A sense of welcome

In the French voluntary sector, it's hardly a caricature to say that welcoming someone into a community centre is like offering them a coffee, if possible organic or even fair trade, and leaving them alone to get on with their activities. The intimidation and slight discomfort that can arise from sharing the same space without speaking to each other can be hard to overcome.

How do you put people at ease when they arrive at a meeting, especially if they are new or not very comfortable with the codes of the meeting? By being at ease yourself! The best advice would be to welcome people arriving at a meeting as you would welcome them into your own home! Would you leave them alone in the lounge with a coffee if they were early? Would we pay no attention to people arriving late? Would you have to ask for the floor to get it?

If this meeting took place in your home, would you take the time to get to know everyone? In front of everyone or in private? Would there be a 'meet and greet' time, with drinks and snacks? What would your role be? Your answers will give you your role during a meeting if you are the organiser. It's a role in its own right, one that requires you not to be at the heart of all the discussions, but to be available to welcome people throughout the meeting.



## *Start by giving the floor to the participants*

When you arrive at a meeting, you often have a lot on your mind that has little to do with the meeting: have I paid for my children's canteen? Have I replied to Valérie's email? What about the appointment with the mechanic? And the train tickets for the holidays? All these thoughts won't stop if you're passive, listening to someone, for example. That's what leads you to take out your smartphone and get on with your business.

To involve everyone in the meeting, it is effective to ensure that everyone can express their views on a common subject, whatever the subject in fact may be. To ensure that everyone has their say, it is important not to form groups of more than 4 people, as shyness will otherwise lead some of them to give up speaking.

This airlock between your life and the meeting will lead you to actively listen to a few other people, which will force you to put aside any "parasitic" thoughts - that mental to-do list that gets activated when you have a free moment. And the fact that everyone has their say means that the floor is no longer reserved for the VIPs of the meeting, with the others acting as an audience. Example of an airlock: walk around in groups of 3 for 30 minutes, giving each person 10 minutes to set out their expectations, or tell an anecdote, or give their point of view on a subject...

## *What are we doing together?*

The topics to be discussed at the meeting are often defined in advance, generally using a collaborative digital tool that is practical but unused by most and therefore inoperative. And then putting an item on the agenda means taking power over the group, by daring to impose an item on the whole group on your own initiative. Making this clear in advance and in writing means assuming this power. And that doesn't come naturally to everyone.

It is often only the most legitimate people who will allow themselves to influence a meeting by proposing items for the agenda. These are often the same people who will then give their opinion, persuade others of their position, and so on. This legitimacy often comes from a position of dominance: it is often white, male, older, educated and well-to-do people who dominate the speaking field in a meeting.

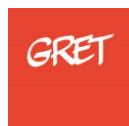
This is why it is useful to **draw up the agenda collectively at the start of the meeting**, even if it has already been prepared in advance, making sure that everyone feels entitled to add "their points". If the size of the meeting is intimidating for some, it can be useful to **take time out in small groups** to collect the points to be covered during the meeting.

Similarly, the order in which the various points are dealt with is best defined collectively, as it involves each participant in respecting the agenda. The group's power over the agenda is a **very clear indicator of the degree of participation** expected of participants by the organiser.

## *What is expected of the participants?*

The various points to be dealt with during the meeting are entitled by their theme. But the theme says nothing about the nature of what is expected of the participants. If, for example, there is the item "next general meeting", will it be a matter of planning the proceedings? Write the invitations? Approving the budget? Think about the evening's festivities?

There are many scales of participation, explaining the different **possible degrees of involvement of each participant in the points dealt with**, from passivity to co-decision, consultation or concertation. Looking at the agenda in this way makes it clear what is expected of the participants.



And regardless of the subject matter, will they be listening politely throughout the meeting? Will there be decisions to be made? Time for creativity? Debates in preparation for a future decision?

And regardless of the type of participation expected, what **type of speech** is expected? The codes of the meeting imply that speakers must make clear and concise arguments leading to a well-constructed and appropriate proposal. This doesn't make it easy for everyone to speak. I sometimes wonder whether our unconscious model for meetings might be the "Council of Ministers", with its protocol and smooth talking in the service of the President, to adorn ourselves with the seriousness and effectiveness of this type of meeting. But is it really serious and effective? Is it suitable for volunteers? Do participants have to follow orders from above? Or should they define everything themselves? What values do we want to convey through the processes we propose in our meetings?

And why shouldn't we take inspiration from what we do 'at home'? With our friends in our living room, there are arguments exchanged when we discuss a subject, but there are also anecdotes, desires, stories of experience, jokes, memories, associations of ideas...

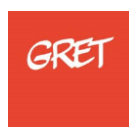
## Speech management

The way in which speech is managed within a group is the key to determining where you stand. Is it controlled? On what aspects? By whom? With what intentions? Is it necessary? Effective? On what criteria? What effect does it have on participants? Is it a good idea to invite outsiders?

A group will attract and retain people who share its codes, culture and values. By answering the questions in this text, you can visualise the profile of participants who would be at ease in your meetings... Or you can visualise the changes you need to make to the way the group operates to be able to welcome different profiles.

One of the characteristics of a meeting is that the rules governing who can speak are often strict... This makes discussions rigid, reserves the floor for people who are not disturbed by the day-to-day constraints mentioned above, and makes it difficult to **achieve the spontaneity and fluidity necessary for a lively discussion.**

Couldn't we start a meeting without any specific rules on speaking, and set them as we go along depending on the problems that arise in the group? If one person is monopolising the floor, should we establish a time rule for everyone or ask the person who talks a lot to talk less?



What if the rules weren't the same for everyone? What if some people had to be forced to limit their speech and others had to be helped to speak more often, rather than looking for standardised rules or speech management tools?

### What if we did more than just hold meetings?

What if there were times when there were constraints on speech, such as when decisions had to be made, and other times when there were no constraints, such as a meal, a games evening or a film session?

Put another way, if the only thing offered to group participants is to meet, even in a participative way, the desire to get involved is likely to wane. So there is a **balance to be struck between the time devoted to meetings and the time devoted to action.**

And beyond that, there is a balance to be struck between the **time devoted to the common cause of the participants**, whether during actions or meetings, and the **time devoted to being together for pleasure or to celebrate our actions.**

But do we still have free moments, with nothing at stake, in our collective workings? Because it is often these moments, because they are free, that are the most unifying, facilitating the inclusion and participation of everyone in the functioning of the group.

